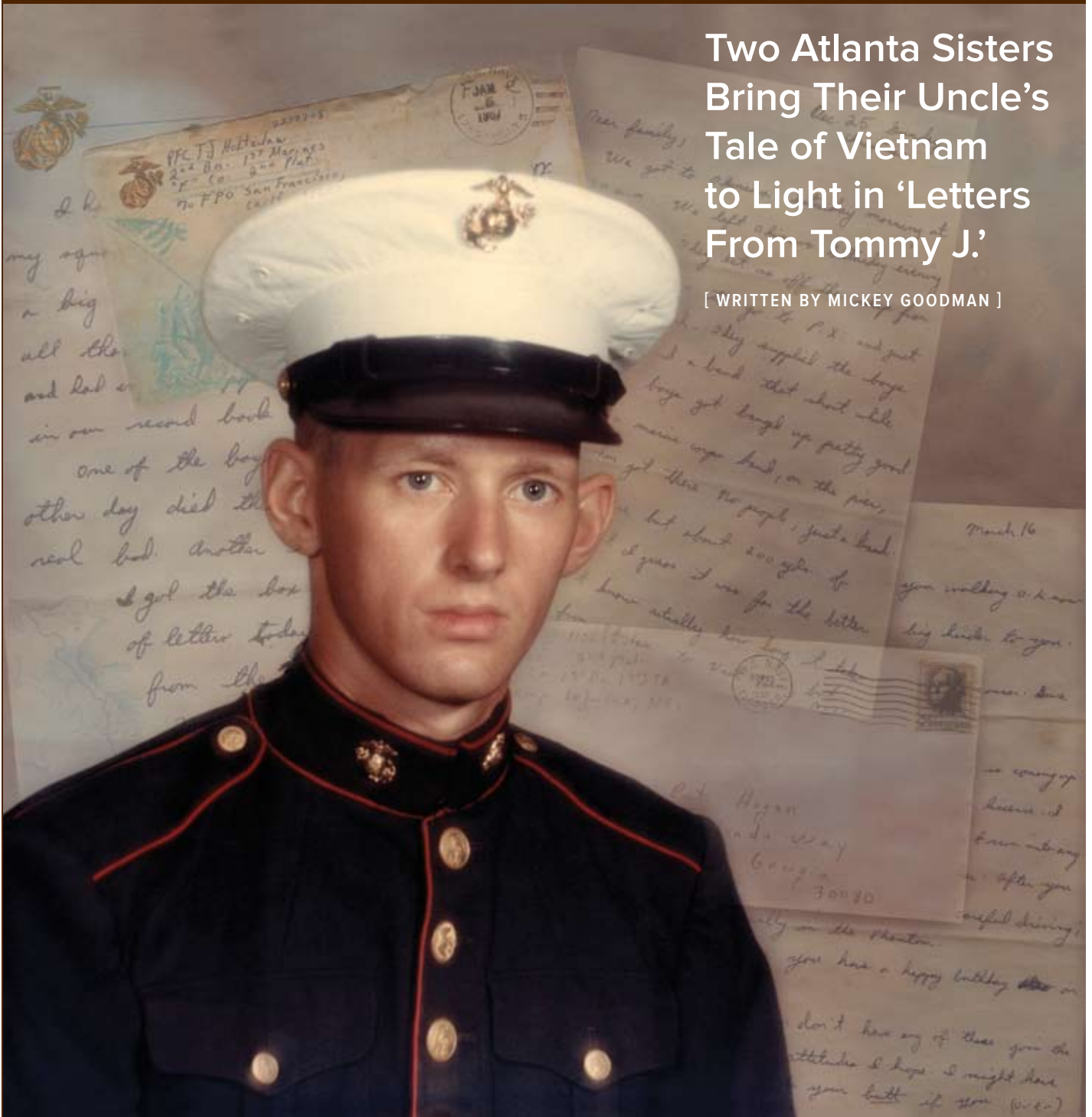


LEST WE FORGET

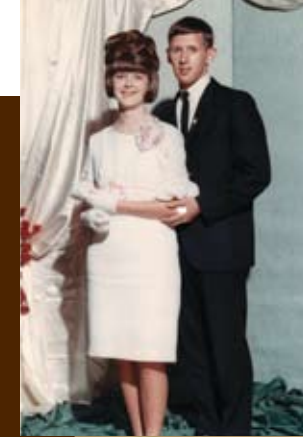
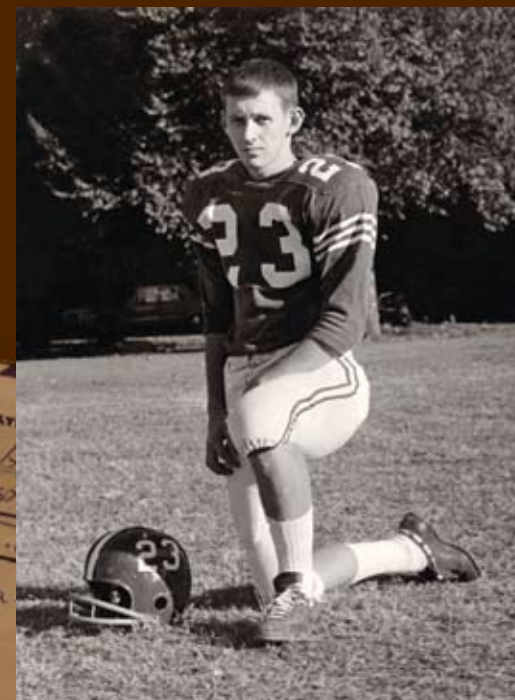
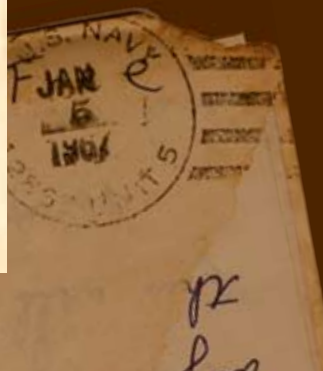
Two Atlanta Sisters
Bring Their Uncle's
Tale of Vietnam
to Light in 'Letters
From Tommy J.'

[WRITTEN BY MICKEY GOODMAN]



PHOTOGRAPHY
COURTESY OF ?

After a hair-raising drive through hail pellets and near tornado winds, Terri Walker dashes into her North Atlanta home. She's frazzled and running late for an appointment, which has thrown the super-organized president of Terri C. Walker Consulting, Inc. for a loop. Her laid-back sister Connie Hughes, a scheduling coordinator at Newton Medical Center, isn't bothered by the delay. She soothes her sister, then delivers a glass of water.



your 16th birthday is coming up for the big driver's license. I will pass the test, don't run into any trouble watching the blinker. After you pass you beat be careful driving; you have a happy birthday on the phantom.



Mr. Johnny Holtzclaw
1964 Sumter St., N.W.
Atlanta, Georgia 30318



As opposite in temperament as they are in looks — Walker with dark brown hair and eyes, Hughes, blond with baby blues — the sisters also have different takes on life. “I’m the country mouse. Terri’s the city mouse,” Hughes said. “She always has every hair in place. I’m much more casual.” The two also differed on the collaboration of their new book, “Letters From Tommy J.,” the story of their Uncle Thomas J. Holtzclaw III’s year in Vietnam.

An Idea Takes Root

Tommy J.’s story ended in Vietnam, but Hughes and Walker didn’t know the full story until their grandmother, Leila Holtzclaw, passed away in 2007. During the sad task of sorting through her things, the sisters discovered a treasure trove of memorabilia from their uncle, who died in Vietnam. The cardboard box from the attic and two pictures always on display were the only remnants of their Uncle Tommy’s short life.

Though it has been 40 years since his brother’s death, their Uncle Johnny’s memories were still painful. He couldn’t think of a reason to revisit that terrible time and decided to burn the box. Walker and Hughes had other ideas. Because Tommy J. had died when they were just two and four, the women knew little about him but had always wondered why his name was unspoken. Their only tenuous connection was a well-worn, red stuffed dog Tommy had given Hughes as a baby. For reasons unknown to her, she had refused to relegate it to the trash pile.

Their uncle and mother reluctantly agreed to give the sisters the precious box. But instead of sorting through

immediately, Hughes took it to Walker’s spacious home for safekeeping. One evening, Walker curled up by the fire and opened the box. The industry consultant and market research analyst who had published catalogues was stunned. “I felt like I was touching history,” she said. “I knew this story had to be told.”

Hughes couldn’t envision compiling the letters into a book, doubting anyone would want to read it. To her, they made up a single patchwork of their family quilt. Still, she was in awe of the then-18-year-old man who had such a strong desire to serve and protect his country. “When I was 18, my best friends and I giggled endlessly on the phone,” Hughes said. “Tommy’s best friend was the gun he always carried with him to protect his life. I never imagined how many lives his story could touch.”

The more she delved through the box, the more intrigued Walker became. Her Grandmother Leila had saved so much more than just letters. There were report cards with rows of As and Bs, his Boy Scouts medals, high school athletic letters from his years playing soccer, football, basketball and track and his service medals, including a purple heart. She learned he was a member of the Honor Club, student government treasurer and more. He had also completed two years in the Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC), which likely played a big part in his decision to join the Marines. Anxious for her sister to read the letters, she made multiple copies, fearing the fragile paper would not survive much handling.

Hughes credits her sister with doing the lion’s share of the research. Walker jumped feet first into the Vietnam War, locating places on the map where Tommy J. had fought. She also searched for the people he mentioned in his letters, particularly his best friend, Patrick (Pat) Hogan to whom many of the letters were written.



I have good news. Every man in my squad got an appreciation letter from a big general over here for getting all these V.C. They were real important and had important papers. The letter goes in our record book. Good start. One of the boys who got shot the other day died this morning. It was real bad. Another in getting discharged. I got the box you sent and all of letter today. I even a letter from the Hogan's and one from Tommy Neal. I can't catch up on letter. I can't find time maybe I will catch up soon. (over)



Gradually, the pieces of the young Marine's short life came together. One former classmate would lead to another and yet another. The result was "Letters From Tommy J, A Marine's Story 1966 - 1967," which included reprints of his letters interspersed with photos from his high school days and those he took in 'Nam.

Tommy's Tale

One glance at the book jacket reveals a young man still in his teens wearing a somber far-away stare — much different from his beaming senior and prom pictures from O'Keefe High School in Atlanta. In the background are his letters, written in a neat hand on tissue-like paper used by military personnel long before the Internet made instant communication possible.

Through her search, Walker found Tommy J.'s friends, Pat Hogan and his brother Mike. Before contacting Pat by phone, Walker sent him an outline of the book, which contained Tommy J.'s letters to his parents. For several weeks, Walker heard nothing. Then out of the

blue, she received a package with a note that said: "I still miss him after all these years."

The box from Hogan was filled with letters written by Tommy J., as well as his permission to include them in the book. Though many described the same battles he had shared with his family, the details were much more vivid. He confessed that boot camp was a "whole lot harder than Boy Scout Camp" and how tough it had been to kill his first Viet Cong.

Lonnie Matthews of Glasgow, Ky., served alongside Tommy J. through the tough times. "He was more than just my buddy," Matthews said. "He was more like my brother. It's hard to describe the closeness."

Matthews not only took many of the pictures but appeared in others taken by Tommy J. They clearly depict their youthful vitality and quirky senses of humor. One photo shows Tommy J. painstakingly sewing a new stripe onto his uniform while aboard the U.S.S. Gaffey. Another reveals four friends — one of them Lonnie Matthews — obviously in a high mood waving a pinup photo. Out of the four, Matthews was the only survivor.

In a tent at base camp, they nailed up a sign, "The Second Platoon Playboys." Their "street" was Sunset Strip. On the rear corner flew a Confederate flag, a symbol of the Georgia lad they called "Cotton" and the Kentucky dairy farmer who longed for southern fried chicken while Foxtrot Company dined on C-rations for 90 days. [Should I know what the Foxtrot Company is? -be]

In another photo, Tommy J. and Matthews are standing outside the four-man bunker in the hills of Nui Loc Son they built by filling and stacking sandbags. "We grabbed the good times when we could," Matthews said. "I don't think we were separated for more than three or four days the entire time when each of us went to the dentist. We were in the same squad and the same firing team in Foxtrot Company."

STATISTICS FROM VIETNAM

- 58,193 died — 14,838 were Marines like Tommy J.
- 350,000 American casualties
- 1 to 2 million Vietnamese deaths
- 34,475 were regular military
- 17,672 were draftees

Source: National Archives

Matthews was also at Tommy J.'s side on April 20, 1967, the day that he died. "Operation Union," which was billed as a routine sweep, turned into a 20-hour bloodbath. A few days prior to the mission where Foxtrot Company was ordered to move toward the enemy-held village of Binh Son in Quang Ngai Province,

Tommy J. told Matthews and his friend John Jackson that he wasn't going to come back. They tried to reassure him but all were apprehensive. "We were so close to the Viet Cong we could hear them drop in the mortar round," Matthews said. The Marines formed a row across the rice paddy heading toward the village. The

three friends walked side by side.

Tommy J. was hit almost immediately. Dodging bullets, his two comrades dragged him to the edge of the rice paddy where he was shot again. "A corpsman came up to check on Tommy J. but shook his head. He told me he was gone," Matthews said. Moments later, he and Jackson were also wounded, narrowly escaping with their lives.

Coming Home

As a fellow Marine and close friend, Mike Hogan was asked to accompany Tommy J.'s body home. He has vivid memories of that terrible day he heard the news. He was in Marine avionics training in Memphis when a runner brought him a message from headquarters, that read: "Call home immediately."

"When I reached dad, he told me Tommy J. had died and that the family had asked me to escort him home to Atlanta," Hogan said. "I know I was supposed to be a tough Marine and not show any emotions, but that day I stood in the phone booth and bawled like a baby."

Hogan's sad journey took him to the Philadelphia Naval Yard for protocol training and a borrowed set of dress blues. Then he headed to Dover, Del., where a morgue two to three football fields in length was set up. "Nearly every table had a body on it," he said. "It hit me good. This was not a John Wayne movie. This was reality."

Tommy J.'s family took his death particularly hard. Walker and Hughes' Uncle Johnny had shared a room with his brother while the two were growing up. Their mother, Jean who was 11 years older, had taken care of Tommy J. while Leila worked. "Our mom was a surrogate mother to him," Walker said. "When he died, she had a nervous breakdown. Connie and I were sent to live with our father's parents for about six months."



A veil of silence followed the funeral. His father was never quite the same and his mother took the box with all the treasured letters and memorabilia and stored it in the attic. It was not re-opened until Walker and Hughes took possession.

Tommy J.'s Legacy

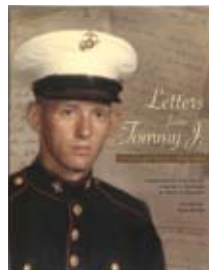
Matthews received a gift of the book from the authors' Uncle Johnny. As he read, buried memories resurfaced — some good, some terrible. “We had promised one another that if something happen, we would contact their relatives,” he said. “I had never had the courage.”

Thirty-four years later, Matthews called Johnny Holtzclaw and asked if he thought his mother would let him visit. She agreed, asking Matthews to retell the story of her son's last days. At the conclusion, she told him that at last, she felt she could have some peace. She even gave him a box of undeveloped slides that arrived after Tommy J.'s death. When Matthews returned home, he made duplicate copies for her.

Though the Holtzclaws had reluctantly agreed to the book, no one realized what an impact it would make. Mike Hogan says it took him awhile to read it and relive the experience. Today, he keeps 20 books at a time in the back of his truck, dispensing them to those who knew and loved Tommy J. He also talks to students who are thinking of joining the military and gives them a copy. “I want them to know what war really is before they sign up,” he said.

Word has spread among Tommy J.'s friends and many have contacted Walker, expressing appreciation. It's also been reprinted in Korean. “The publisher upgraded it to better paper and embossed the cover,” she said. The book is also selling well in countries as far away as Estonia and Australia. One reason is that the story unfolds as Tommy J. lived it. It simply tells his story without taking sides about the Vietnamese war.

For Walker and Hughes, working on the book has taken them on a sentimental journey into a family history they never knew. “My kids think it ought to be required reading for every high school student,” Hughes said. “The book has made Tommy J.'s short life immortal. He'll live forever,” she said with pride. **PN**



**“LETTERS FROM TOMMY J.,
A MARINE'S STORY 1966-1967”**
Walker Press
www.lettersfromtommyj.com
Also available through book stores